

Review Essay

Seeing out the Century

DOUGLAS TALLACK

Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art and Culture 1900–1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with W. W. Norton, 1999, \$60 cloth). Pp. 408. ISBN 0 393 04723 7, 0 87427 122 3.

Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art and Culture 1900–1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with W. W. Norton, 1999, \$60 cloth). Pp. 398. ISBN 0 393 04815 2, 0 87427 123 1.

Appropriately, it was the Whitney Museum in New York City which signed off American visual arts of the twentieth century in 1999 with a two-part exhibition entitled *The American Century: Art and Culture*, each with its own well-illustrated catalogue, and with a web-site, *The American Century Online*, still available as a “Past Exhibition” at <http://www.whitney.org>. Beginning in 1907 Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney had championed American art when it was overshadowed by European art, but by the century’s end and seventy years after the Whitney was founded the United States had become the pre-eminent presence in visual culture. It had begun to assume this position not too long after publishing magnate Henry Luce used the phrase “the American Century” in *Life* magazine in February 1941, and, eight years later, it was *Life* magazine which picked up Clement Greenberg’s championing of Jackson Pollock and headlined the question “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” Henry Luce believed that a United States, speaking with one voice, must have a world-role, but, if he correctly anticipated a US-led process of cultural globalisation, he failed to recognise the differences within the country and the buffeting which national identity would endure once the unity brought about by World War Two and its immediate aftermath had been dissipated. Luce’s own media business augmented

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the significance of the expression “the American century” and symbolised the coming together of commerce and culture in an ambiguous logic of innovation and yet sameness which the word “variety” so perfectly conjures up. Whatever else it has been, then, America’s century has been one of reproducible images and populist sentiments, expressed through a battery of cultural forms from print, painting, and photography to radio, cinema, television, and digitised media.

Within this powerful set of political, social, economic, and technological circumstances the visual arts have sought to identify what constitutes art and, concomitantly, to formulate theorised or at least working relationships between art and life, beginning with what we still call realism and continuing through modernism to post-modern pastiche and performance- and site-specific art. There have been stout attempts to demarcate respective spheres within visual culture under the impact of modernism – overall, *the* cultural movement of the American century – even as visual forms have migrated towards each other so that such notions as a consumable work of art or a painted building have become quite commonplace. Migrations brought about by the increasing interdependence of modes of production and dissemination within the culture industry have, though, been a source of aesthetic innovation and strength: if Sol LeWitt’s or Chris Burden’s work is consumed, that is part of its resistance to consumption. The results are very noticeable in *The American Century* which tends towards the inclusive notion of visual culture rather than art. To this end, both exhibition catalogues include a large number of individually authored “Sidebar Texts”; for instance, “Vaudeville and the Follies” and “Bebop and Rhythm and Blues” from the 1900–1950 volume, and “Modern Dance: Chance and Improvisation” and “Video Art, Film and Video Installation” from the 1950–2000 volume. These “Sidebar Texts” complement the comprehensive narrative accounts provided by Barbara Haskell for the first half of the century and Lisa Phillips for the second half. Narrative accounts, sidebar texts and the excellent illustrations show how twentieth-century American artists, with the indispensable help of Marcel Duchamp (who took US citizenship in 1954), have posed some of the most important, if discomfiting, questions about the status and even the point of art precisely by focussing upon intersections between art forms and, more and more, between art and consumer and industrial culture. By the 1950s and 1960s there is no easy way of distinguishing the cultural context from the artworks; as is apparent to visitors to Part Two of the Whitney show as they wander past Claes Oldenburg’s *Bedroom Ensemble, Replica 1* (1969) and into a plastic-fantastic living space oriented towards a television screen.

The global reach to which Henry Luce and other forces within the culture industry have aspired has, ironically, questioned not simply the supposed aura of the artwork but, equally, the very idea that there can be a national art and a national identity which can be read off from that art. This is a consistently troublesome theme in *The American Century*, and it is now quite hard to imagine an exhibition in another hundred years which would possess a clear national theme. Luce and the culture industry operated in a cosmopolitan world, underpinned by technical and industrial developments, and it is therefore not surprising that the base in nature, from which nineteenth-century American art drew its identity and many of its strengths, has been eroded during the twentieth

century. Nature has its proponents, though, and these are well represented in the catalogues: abstract artist, Arthur Dove; Ansel Adams, particularly his photographs of Yosemite; American Scene painters (Thomas Hart Benson, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood) and, also from the 1930s but in an anguished vein, the seascapes of Marsden Hartley; and, in a comprehensive combination of sculpture and architecture, the earthworks of the 1960s and 1970s by Michael Heizer (*Complex One* in Nevada, 1972), James Turrell (notably, his excavation and transformation of the Roden Crater in Arizona), and Robert Smithson. For all the emphasis upon the urban, industrial scene and the cosmopolitan modernism of most twentieth-century American art, a photograph of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) was chosen for the frontispiece to the 1950-Present catalogue. But it is at least a possibility that this is the last time in a major, all-encompassing exhibition that we will catch so consistently the echoes of the wilderness past.

There are two other conjunctions of the traditional and the modern (and post-modern) in twentieth-century art which stand out in the Whitney's summative exhibition: the tension between representational and abstract impulses and the struggle over the human figure. Unlike such mid-century American modernists as Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, the early American modernists Max Weber, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Joseph Stella maintained more contact with their subject-matter and particularly when they painted New York City. That is to say, they were modernists in the dual sense of seeking ways to convey the pace and dynamism of modernity (if not to represent it in the traditional sense) and, on the other hand, the experience of being part of the revolution in perception which made the surface of the work of art the focus of attention. For all the formal experimentation by those painters for whom the Armory Show was such an event, it is perverse not to see the elevated trains and skyscrapers in Weber's *New York* (1913) and Martin's *Lower Manhattan* (1920). Similarly, Brooklyn Bridge is unmistakably the subject which Stella painted over and over again between 1917 and the 1940s, and we can recognize the Radiator Building in O'Keeffe's *The Radiator Building – Night, New York* (1927). Yet we cannot easily look through the overlapping shapes in Weber, the wash of water-colours in Marin or get away from the fact that O'Keeffe's is indisputably a painted building, partially gridded, be-hatted by its crown, and centred by the searchlights which arrow into it yet de-centred by the distracting red neon letters "Stieglitz" (O'Keeffe's husband). Similarly, the painterly sheen which Stella imparts to his depiction of the steel cables of the bridge arrests our efforts to attach signifier to signified, and if we do persist then we "see" the electricity (rather than the Bridge's steel cables) which fascinated Stella, the Italian immigrant, as it did the Italian futurists whose work he had seen at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris in 1912.

Edward Hopper – who else, given that the Whitney was hosting the *American Century* show? – is at the heart of this tension between representationalism and modernism. As is well known, Hopper painted many scenes without people (*Drug Store*, 1927, *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, 1928, and *Approaching a City*, 1946, for example) but even in populated scenes the people in the diner in *Nighthawks* (1942) or the couple in the truly despairing work, *Hotel by a Railroad* (1952), barely communicate. This lack of communication is, though, part of a more general

editing out of other in-betweens which representationalism includes; indeed, depends on. Between the sketches and the finished paintings, *Dawn in Pennsylvania* (1942) and *Hotel Lobby* (1943), Hopper removed, respectively, the details of a station platform and additional figures from the lobby, together with most signs of interaction between those who remain. The modernist architect Mies van der Rohe famously coined the pronouncement “less is more” and this could well be a reminder to notice the overlooked modernist elements in Hopper, that most realist of American artists.

Paradoxically, as Hopper the realist edits out reality so the work of the leading American modernist of the pre-war period, Stuart Davis, gets more and more full but within an abstract argot. Davis’s was not the non-objectivity practised and theorised by Kandinsky but, rather, a painterly technique derived from collage. In *Lucky Strike* (1921) and *New York Mural* (1932), as in much of his work, Davis includes not the signs of an urban society – as in collage – but painted signs. His is almost a still-life technique but adapted to a consumer-culture which has emptied out the content of objects while leaving their form intact. Within that painted culture, as Davis saw it, a pipe, a ticket machine, a brown derby, a gas pump, and images and words from packaging all match skyscrapers and sections of the El for size and so inhabit each other’s space. In the mural *Swing Landscape* (1938), Davis even succeeded in painting abstractly when employed by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Arts Project, with its orthodoxy of New Deal realism. As the claims that painting could convey three-dimensional space gave way under the combined impact of the various modernisms, not to mention the challenge of still and then moving photographs, so Davis opted for the alternative basis for modernist art, namely that it responds to its time using whatever techniques seem appropriate. One might say the same of Andy Warhol but the results could not be more different.

The remaining point of tension brought out by the Whitney’s two-part exhibition centres on the human figure. Across the one hundred years of art there is a great deal of fragmentation, flattening, deconstruction, and abandoning of the human figure, whether in Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* series, Pop Art, Cindy Sherman’s photographs or the various minimalisms of the post-abstract expressionist period; or even in the way Hopper paints the skin of his human figures (he really is *the* centre of *The American Century* and, alone, managed to appear in both parts of the exhibition). Yet *The American Century* still gives plenty of emphasis to people-centred art. Unlike the curators of the Royal Academy’s very Europe-oriented *American Art in the Twentieth Century* (1993), Barbara Haskell gives due weight to the Ashcan School in the years before the Armory show. Hopper’s art comes next and, if he drops the communal humanity which is so unconvincingly celebrated by his contemporaries, the American Scene painters, he yet retains an interest in a few human figures who are perhaps most compelling as their relations with others break down (that sickening skin-colour must signify something!). Then, part way through the second half of *The American Century*, just as Brad and his friends seem to signal the end of seeing in the round, comes arguably the most startling moment in the whole exhibition. During one visit the attention of a small crowd was expertly drawn by a docent to Lichtenstein’s highly parodic works, but one by one almost everyone in the

gallery realised that the old lady standing behind them, burdened with shopping bags was not real. *The Shopper* is lifesize, has real human hair, and she (it is impossible not to refer to Duane Hanson's art-work in any other way) had a sense of weariness beyond that of shopping fatigue. Even if one had been expecting to come across a Duane Hanson somewhere in the exhibition, the shock of the real was tangible. Someone looked into her shopping bags. Quite a few people peered into her eyes. Others checked whether the nearby Museum attendant was real. Arguably, no other art work in the exhibition, however disturbing, produced the same level of reaction as this now somewhat dated sculpture: and it could not have been other than a response to the ordinariness of the human condition focussed on a representation of the human body. Something of the extraordinariness of the human condition, seen through the body, can be glimpsed in Bill Viola's video/sound installation, *The Crossing* (1996). At the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1998, for instance, the frameless image of a man being deluged by water, beginning with an isolated drop, and, round the "back" of the screen, being consumed by fire, beginning with a small flame breaking out on the ground beside him, was projected at the top of the stairway to the first floor. People stood for lengthy periods at the foot of the stairs, walked up the stairs equally transfixed as the show was replayed, and watched it from "behind." Anyone who had seen *The Crossing* and who then queued up, a little apprehensively, near the end of the *American Century* exhibition to see Viola's *Tree of Knowledge* could be forgiven for thinking that the figure at the far end of the corridor silhouetted against the interactive tree was another of Viola's stunning projected images. It turned out to be the person currently experiencing the show and soon to be replaced by oneself.